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Babel Blackness: The Aesth-ethical Turn in Post-colonial Translation

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Cover Page Footnote

"Zong! composed entirely from the words of the case report, *Gregson vs. Gilbert*, related to the murder of Africans on board a slave ship at the end of the eighteenth century, counts the massacre by drowning of some 130 enslaved Africans over the course of ten days beginning on November 29th, 1781. The captain of the eponymous slave ship, *Zong*, having made many navigational errors resulting in extending the length of the voyage from West Africa to Jamaica ordered the Africans be thrown overboard so as to allow the owners of the ship, the Gregsons, to claim indemnity from their insurers, the Gilberts. When the insurers refused to honour the contract of insurance, the ship's owners initiated legal action against them, which proved to be successful. Upon appeal, however, the insurers, the Gilberts were granted a new trial. The report of that hearing, *Gregson vs Gilbert* constitutes the only extant, public document related to the massacre. Through fugal and counterpointed strategies, *Zong!* explodes the coded, documented silence of the historical text to become an anti-narrative lament that tells the story of this haunting and tragic massacre: it cannot be told yet must be told; it can only be told by not telling," accessed on January 30, 2022 at <https://www.nourbese.com/poetry/zong-3/> Distressed with what happened, the author had to reconstruct the whole story in a separate blog accessed on January 30, 2022 <http://www.setspeaks.com/> This is the question asked by Philip in her blog post and Facebook page. See also Nasrin, Himada, "Ethics Beyond Language" accessed on January 30, 2022 <http://www.canadianart.ca/essays/ethics-beyond-language/> In this periodization, which aims at taking into account more than one variable—ethics, aesthetics, and translation—I follow two examples: the first one is from Chesterman (2001), who offers a very valuable historization of the complex relation between translation and ethics, and Susan Basnett, who commenting on Steiner's periodization in *After Babel* declares that: "It is virtually impossible to divide periods according to dates for (...) human culture is a dynamic system. Attempts to locate stages of cultural development within strict temporal boundaries contradict that dynamism" (1998:48-9). Similarly, my periodization, in part diachronic, in part synchronic, attempts to give an overview only on some of the central themes shared or opposed by translation, ethics and aesthetics. As it is known, Plato transcribed Socrates' theses in his writings. Socrates' aversion to writing is one of the main themes in Plato's *Phaedrus*, that has been eloquently re-read and re-interpreted by Jacques Derrida in "Plato's Pharmacy" ([1968] 1981), whose nucleus revolves around the polysemy (and translation) of the Greek word *pharmakon*. For example: Chesterman's *Hieronymic Oath* (2001), ethics in children's literature (Oittinen 2014), activism and translation (Tymoczko 2006), crowdsourcing (Dolmaya 2011), ethics in translator and interpreter training (Baker & Maier 2011/2014). See, for example, the recent article on translating blackness in Italy by Barbara Somuah-Oforu and Candice Whitney, accessed on January 30, 2022 at <https://www.publicbooks.org/translating-italy-translating-blackness/> There is an ongoing debate about the recent translation of *Zong!* in the past four months in Italy, which has generated three very polemic articles, two of which re-propose the necessity to approach *Zong* through the Mediterranean crisis, justifying the Italian translation. Only one accuses the translated text to have violated two important ethical principles: fidelity and trust. Accessed on January 30, 2022 at <https://www.pulplibri.it/zong-traduttore-traditore/> Some parts of this sessions are the result of my current research into blackness. Glissant's discussion on "consent not to be a single being" is a quote from an article I wrote for the Charles University journal *Litteraria Pragensia* (see References). It is an ongoing research which also informs my practice as translator of books (mainly essays) authored by black or diasporic people. Apposition is a term widely used by Fred Moten, drawn from both linguistics and biology. While in the former it is a construct with two noun phrases (np) next to each other in a clause, referring to the same person or thing, in the latter appositionality is the growth of successive layers of a cell wall. Derrida would call this addition an augmentation, a more life, a survival. "Consent à n'être plus un seul": this is the original quote, uttered in French by Glissant in conversation with Malian scholar, filmmaker, and historian Manthia Diawara and translated by Christopher Winks in 2011. The conversation is retrievable online,

accessed on January 30, 2022, https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/csis-2/blackatlantic/research/Diawara_text_defined.pdf Ibid. Ibid. For an originarity see Chandler 2013. See Moten on the relevance of “figuring out” as a way to imagine another knowledge of the world, accessed on January 30, 2022 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmnFeGaCkGI&t=134s> See Margarida Mendes “Arjuna Neuman and Denise Ferreira da Silva ‘Serpent Rain,’” accessed on January 30, 2022 at <https://www.vdrome.org/neuman-da-silva> Ibid. This is not the only wreckage re-membered by the film, there is also another slave ship in the two artists’ mind, the Norwegian Fredensborg (ibid.) This sentence echoes Moten’s “unasked question,” which is blackness’ quest(ion): “Can this sharing of a life in homelessness, this interplay of the refusal of what has been refused and consent, this undercommon appositionality, be a place from which to know, a place out of which emerges neither self-consciousness nor knowledge of the other but an improvisation that proceeds from somewhere on the other side of an unasked question?” (Moten 2013b:756). This is a reference to Moten’s essay “The Case of Blackness” (2008). See References.

Babel Blackness: The Aesth-ethical Turn in Post-colonial Translation

EMANUELA MALTESE

In June 2021, renowned Canadian-Trinidadian poet and lawyer Marlene NourbeSe Philip was informed that the Italian translation by Renata Morresi of her book-length poem *Zong! As Told to the Author by Setaey Adamu Boateng* (2012) had been published by Benwey Series, an Italian publishing house.¹ The absence of contact between the writer and the translator during the entire translating and editing process—except for a feeble attempt by Morresi in 2016, when she wrote to Philip stating that she had interest in translating *Zong!* and was in search of a publisher—prompted Philip to investigate the case. Not only did she discover that the Canadian publisher, with the support of the Canada Council, had sold the translation rights to the Italian one, but after analyzing the translated text, she also regrettably noted that her poem had been mistranslated. *Zong!* has a spatial configuration, a form that is not separate from its content. The spacing between words is a central aspect of the book: it stands for the water in whose waves the bodies of enslaved Africans on *Zong* were drowned. In the Italian translation, this very essential and critical aspect of the poem had been outrageously desecrated, as spaces had been filled and replaced by longer Italian words. As Philip comments in her blog (2021), Renata Morresi,

failed to respect the foundational and organizing principle of *Zong!*, which is that no word or cluster of words can come directly below another: each word, fragment or word cluster is seeking the space above to breathe as those massacred 240 years ago this November were not able to breathe.²

Philip asked for the destruction of the unauthorized translation and urged her readers to acknowledge and respect the ethical responsibilities associated with works of art, her question being: “How do we make art in an ethical way?” (Philip’s blog).

Inspired by the story of the unauthorized Italian translation of *Zong!*,³ this essay seeks to reply to Philip’s quest(ion) for (of) ethics in works of art (that is, in aesthetic works), by

¹ “*Zong!* composed entirely from the words of the case report, *Gregson vs. Gilbert*, related to the murder of Africans on board a slave ship at the end of the eighteenth century, counts the massacre by drowning of some 130 enslaved Africans over the course of ten days beginning on November 29th, 1781. The captain of the eponymous slave ship, *Zong*, having made many navigational errors resulting in extending the length of the voyage from West Africa to Jamaica ordered the Africans be thrown overboard so as to allow the owners of the ship, the Gregsons, to claim indemnity from their insurers, the Gilberts. When the insurers refused to honour the contract of insurance, the ship’s owners initiated legal action against them, which proved to be successful. Upon appeal, however, the insurers, the Gilberts were granted a new trial. The report of that hearing, *Gregson vs Gilbert* constitutes the only extant, public document related to the massacre. Through fugal and counterpointed strategies, *Zong!* explodes the coded, documented silence of the historical text to become an anti-narrative lament that tells the story of this haunting and tragic massacre: it cannot be told yet must be told; it can only be told by not telling.”

See: www.nourbese.com/poetry/zong-3/

² Distressed with what happened, the author had to reconstruct the whole story in a separate blog, www.setspeaks.com/

³ The purpose of mentioning *Zong!* here is to discuss ethics, aesthetics, and translation. As a result, I will not discuss the comparative analysis between *Zong!* and its Italian translation. By showing the main discrepancies between her work and the Italian translation, NourbeSe Philip has already done so in her blog.

translating it, or—borrowing from the practice of Jacques Derrida by which one imparts more life and more than life, or *survie*, to a text—by *augmenting* it to form another question: How do we translate works of art in an *aesth-ethical* way?⁴ How do we embrace a practice of translation that is itself able to embrace both the need to account for difference (the ethical right to be different), and the creative force and perceptible (aesthetical) beauty of works of art? Stated differently: can works of art be translated in a way that is *beautiful*, without inflicting pain and violence upon them? In framing the discussion this way, I am already tracing out some trajectories for the terms ethics and aesthetics, for I am approaching beauty as entangled with writing—for me, it emerges when writing is musical; for others, when it is correctly written—and ethics as captured in the double bind of violence and resistance. I will delve into this approach in the final part of my paper. However, it is crucial to mention it now for a preliminary understanding of what is (c)overtly included in my discussion.

While the perils posed by postcolonial translation have been widely examined in the past thirty years (Niranjana, 1992; Spivak, 1993; Venuti, 1998; Tymoczko, 1999 and 2010; Bassnett and Trivedi, 1999; Simon and St. Pierre, 2000; Bertacco, 2014 among others), what this examination does is to propose a translation practice that is informed by both aesthetics and ethics. Indeed, it presents an *aesth-ethical* practice, that draws on recent debates on black aesthetics, with specific reference to the black optimism (BO) of cultural theorist and poet Fred Moten and the Black Feminist Po-Ethics (BFPE) of sociologist and artist Denise Ferreira da Silva.⁵

Following the lead of Andrew Chesterman and his “Proposal for a Hieronymic Oath,” the paper will be divided into three sections: I will first examine the main theories of ethics and aesthetics that have affected Western translation studies; I will then analyze how those theories have been both used and opposed in the postcolonial translation of literary texts (especially written by black authors); and I will finally introduce an *aesth-ethical* model as proposed by AO and BFP within black aesthetics, and foreground its implications in postcolonial translation. A conclusion will follow about the possible outcomes of the offered proposal, namely, an alternative way to know and improve the translation of postcolonial black literature, and a more critical and responsible awareness capable of preventing episodes analogous to the unauthorized mistranslation of *Zong!*.

Ethics and Aesthetics in Translation Studies: An Overview

As Maria Tymoczko asserts: “Translation is seen as an ethical, political, and ideological activity, not simply as a mechanical linguistic transposition or a literary art” (*Translation, Resistance* 16). In this assertion, ethics is conflated with aesthetics, meaning that literary art is placed at the

⁴ For Derrida translation as a form of survival is an augmentation of life. It does not allow a text to have more life; it is rather already the “more life” of a text and the continuation of life itself. *Survie* is both survival and afterlife, more life and more than life (“De Tours de Babel” 206).

⁵ Although Moten declares to be “reticent” to the use of the term black optimism, just as Frank III Wilderson and Jared Sexton might be of the term Afro-pessimism, he prefers it to the latter, because he is more inclined to the promises contained in the work optimism, namely joy and life over death and pain (“Blackness and Nothingness” 738). Nonetheless, Black optimism is blackness itself and as such is inescapable from the entanglement between death and life, and joy and pain.

service of the ethical duty. In other words, what Greek philosophers referred to as *ēthikos*—customs, habits, and systems of habits, or for the Romans, morals—should help to perceive the beauty of life, or *aesthetikos*.

Nevertheless, this conflation reflects a trend in translation studies that has only been very influential over the past forty years. Before this lapse, ethics and aesthetics were essentially regarded by both Western philosophers, and early exponents of Translation Studies (TS) as two separate branches of knowledge, even though many of the problems and themes found in aesthetics (what constitutes a beautiful work of art and what does not) allude to ethical theories (what is good and right and what is not). In this section, I will offer a brief historical excursus—one that is not exhaustive, but functional to the analysis pursued here—by looking at four main philosophical tendencies that occurred in the span between the Socratic era (470–399B.C. E) and the post-Enlightenment (from the Romantics until now).⁶

The first tendency engages only with ethics—given that aesthetics as a discipline was founded only in the eighteenth century, the term being coined by philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in *Reflections on Poetry* (1735) to mean “the science of how things are known via the senses” (Graham 246); the second one deals with ethics and the newly-founded and separate aesthetic science; the last two look at the merged domains of ethics and aesthetics according to different approaches.

The first tendency took certain cues from Greek philosophy and its legacy in the Christian world, pondering ethics as the discipline that ruled moral principles and ideals: what is/should be good and what is/should not be good for the individual and the *polis*, the city. As Alastair McIntyre elucidates in his brief introduction to ethics (1998), its major purpose was to strive for *arete*, or human excellence, as the Homeric epics attest; while at the same time adhering to at least a minimum of norms in order to avoid any excess of excellence, something to which only the gods could aspire. Socrates and Plato were the two main contributors to this latter tradition, in which excellence was subjected to judgement and rules (10-14). Socrates’ main ethical thesis was based on virtue: the ideal of virile justice, knowledge of which guaranteed virtuous living (14-15).⁷ Plato reinforced Socrates’ thesis by assigning knowledge of morality only to rationality, leaving out artistic forms. Art cannot know what is just and good because it is a

⁶ In this periodization, which aims at taking into account more than one variable—ethics, aesthetics, and translation—I follow two examples: the first one is from Chesterman’s “Proposal,” who offers a very valuable historization of the complex relation between translation and ethics, and Susan Basnett, who commenting on George Steiner’s periodization in *After Babel* (1975) declares that: “It is virtually impossible to divide periods according to dates for (...) human culture is a dynamic system. Attempts to locate stages of cultural development within strict temporal boundaries contradict that dynamism” (*Translation Studies* 48-9). Similarly, my periodization, in part diachronic, in part synchronic, attempts to give an overview only on some of the central themes shared or opposed by translation, ethics and aesthetics.

⁷ ‘Knowledge’ here is understood as being non-written, given that writing was considered a *pharmakon*, i.e., a ‘poison,’ to philosophers from Socrates to Plato, though the term can also be translated as ‘remedy.’ As it is known, Plato transcribed Socrates’ theses in his writings. Socrates’ aversion to writing is one of the main themes in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, that has been eloquently re-read and re-interpreted by Derrida in “Plato’s Pharmacy” (1981), whose nucleus revolves around the polysemy (and translation) of the Greek word *pharmakon*.

“false” discipline. In Plato’s conception of ethics can already be found the seeds of aesthetic judgment.

This first tendency had a great impact on TS theories centered on the study of equivalence and the ethical principle of faithfulness between original and copy.⁸ In Chesterman’s four-model scheme it would correspond to the representational model and its biblical root according to which: “The ethical imperative is to represent the source text, or the source author’s intention, accurately, without adding, omitting or changing anything” (139).

In terms of aesthetics, on the other hand, Harriett Hulme (2018) contends that, by excluding writing as a work of art from knowledge, Socrates’ and Plato’s ethics have inspired those translation theories which have regarded translated texts as distortions of the source texts, or imitations of an imitation, given that source texts are already an imitation of nature: “In Platonic terms, then, translation itself would be a *pharmakon*: a forgetting of a forgetting, an imitation of an imitation of reality, which separates us from the Truth” (4). This view, in certain ways, is still relevant in today’s debates over equivalence and faithfulness in translation, a conclusion to which the case of *Zong!* testifies. The reason behind this persistence might reside in the lingering power relation manifested by colonialism and imperialism. It is, in fact, noteworthy that subsequent to the medieval period, with the rise of colonialism, equivalence and faithfulness became paradoxically valuable in Europe only insofar as distortion and falseness were adopted in the translation of colonial texts or interpretation of oral native languages. An aspect of this is still very debated in postcolonial translation theories.

The second tendency was inaugurated by Immanuel Kant’s aesthetics and ethics. Here, aesthetics was addressed as an independent theoretical field, one that determined canons of beauty modelled after categories that were universally intelligible. Colonialism, which intensified during this period, served as a substratum for those canons. The Königsberg philosopher was one of the first illuminist thinkers to devote an entire volume to the topic of aesthetics, *The Critique of Judgment* (1790), the third critique of its kind. If we read both this, and the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797) contrapuntally, that is, if we read Kantian ethics and aesthetics as concurrently sounding counterpoints, we notice both a certain inconsistency, and proximity between them. One difference, for example, resides in that Kant’s idea of morality required that it be transparently rational, while his aesthetical judgment allows a distinction between individual pleasure and a transcendental rational one (Graham 16). This notwithstanding, there is contiguity in the assertion that both ethics and aesthetics are subjected to a universalizing, transparent rationality, and its laws.

Enlightenment views of ethics and aesthetics were thus essentially founded on transparency and self-determinacy, two principles that in TS have their counterpart in the norms of formal harmony between source and recipient text that regulate literal translation. The insistence on both the superiority of the source text, and the invisibility of the target text and its translator was still operative throughout the 1960s and on into the early 1980s. However, it was a return to Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” that opened the way toward a new

⁸ As Bassnett holds, equivalence has informed theories focused on both the linguistic structures (i.e., Russian structuralism), and the semantic levels (i.e., Neubert, 1967; Pierce, 1931-58) of source text and target text (*Translation Studies* 35-38).

understanding of transparency. Although he departed from Kant's judgmental pattern, his idea of transparency in translation was partially rooted in Kant's ideas on morality and transparency of the mind, as expressed in the following famous statement: "A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not black its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully" ("The Task" 21).

In spite of this, Benjamin's aesthetics contrast with Kantian universalizing norms of beauty due to "pure language" and its promise of a new language undefined by them and only manifested through translation. Pure language is out of reason's grasp: it is that which language reveals that is translation's "tremendous and only capacity" (22). Benjamin's ambiguity has allowed for a more complex rereading of "The Task," with particular reference to that penned by Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel" (1985), which, according to Bassnett begot the re-valuation of target text as a continuous afterlife of the original: a "new original" (*Translation Studies* 9-10). For Derrida, Benjamin's essay contains the promise of a new creature "with the power to speak on its own" ("Des Tours" 191).

Chesterman's framework coupled this tendency with the representational model in terms of both the persistence of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and the quest for clarity in translation practice. The tendency could also be paired with a norm-based model, but only insofar as translators are not limited to descriptivism. Finally, there are already in this tendency both the move toward target language and culture, and the possibility of a global communion—or state of mutual hospitality—between languages.

The third tendency coincided historically with Romanticism, a period marked by both an ethical preoccupation with the Other (Chesterman 140-141), and a consolidation of aesthetics as a discipline not based anymore on ethical rationalism, but on the creative powers of imagination. There can be no doubt that, in TS, the Romantic revolution was personified by Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, whose "On the Different Methods of Translation" (1813) provided further interpretations of the aesth-ethical values of fidelity and transparency. His theories can be viewed as an example of balance between source and target text, and between ethical and aesthetic requirements. Schleiermacher recognized the importance of both bringing the reader to the source text and bringing the original text and her/his translator to the reader. As Bassnett indicates,

On the one hand there is an immense respect, verging on adulation, for the original, but that respect is based on the individual writer's sureness of its worth. In other words, the translator invites the intellectual, cultivated reader to share what he deems to be an enriching experience, either on moral or aesthetic grounds. (*Translation Studies* 74)

Schleiermacher set out a new approach to translation, known as hermeneutical, which has generated a great deal of subsequent scholarship. In particular, his idea that both source text and target text can be intermediaries for the enrichment of two or more cultures informed what is known as the "cultural turn" in TS (see, for example, Bassnett and Lefevere, 1990). It has also served as the predominant inspiration behind Mario Venuti's study on both the invisibility of the translator, and the strategies of domestication versus foreignization. In *The Translator's Invisibility* (1995) Venuti claims that a "fluent translation is immediately recognizable and

intelligible, ‘familiarized,’ domesticated,” and that under this regime, “the translator works to make his or her work ‘invisible,’ producing the illusory effect of transparency that simultaneously masks its status as an illusion: the translated text seems ‘natural,’ that is, not translated” (5).

In Chesterman’s scheme, this tendency partly reflected the communicative model, whose main ethical goal was the “cross-cultural understanding” of the languages/cultures involved; and partly the model based on representation and its stress on “the value of allowing the Other to appear in its own,” without being domesticated (140). Nevertheless, this preoccupation with the Other was still predicated upon a dualism, I/Other, and did not focus on the “in-between space” of cross-cultural understanding. Homi Bhabha’s study on hybridity and the Third Space (2004), in this sense, sought to find an alternative way to avoid binarism.

The fourth and last tendency corresponded to what in TS is called “the ethical turn.” As Hulme reports (2014), for Barbara Godard, it was initiated by Antoine Berman with his seminal work *L’Épreuve de l’étranger* (1984), then pursued over the next two decades by several other theorists (7).⁹ He goes on to state: “[The] ethical turn hinges upon perceiving the oscillating, and often aggressive, dynamic between self and other, foreign and domestic, which occurs in translation” (7). A collective of scholars from the Scandinavian region (Greenalla, Alvstadb et al., 2019), however, instead highlighted Pym’s suggestion (2014) that “the return to ethics started in the late 90s early 2000s ‘as a reaction against the objective, disinterested attitude towards ethics within the dominating paradigm of descriptive translation studies’ (...)” (639). The return to ethics was also a return to principles of loyalty, faithfulness and justice and resulted in many experimental ethical codes or studies (“Post-colonial writing” 640).¹⁰

In Chesterman’s scheme, this tendency embraced an extended communicative ethics that included Tymoczko’s study on translation and commitment, in which the translation of a work of art, or literary text, was a “commissive act” (110). In the past decade, in fact, this new trend has resulted in an increasing interest in mapping the ethical dimension onto the aesthetic one within a wide and flourishing set of interdisciplinary fields, i.e., cultural, postcolonial, decolonial, queer, feminist, and gender studies, a trend that has been complicated and augmented by new black aesthetic proposals, such as AO and BFP. From a philosophical point of view, the aesth-ethical turn in translation has been strongly affected by Derrida’s groundbreaking essay “Des Tours de Babel,” as well as by his rereading of Plato’s *Phaedrus*. Derrida’s non-concept of *différance* led TS to consider the continual deferral of language manifested through translation. Hume calls the attention to the fact that “Derrida highlights the ways in which translation can offer us an insight into reality precisely through and not despite its textual distance from the reality being described (6).

Aesthetically speaking, there is no way for the Tower (*tour*) of Babel to stand in the irreducible multiplicity of languages. The building is doomed to de-construction. Its architecture is limited by the many de-tours (*tours*) of its own “confusion,” which also is its own translation

⁹ Among these: Koskinen, 2000; Venuti, 2002; Pym, 2001/2014; Baker & Maier, 2011/2014.

¹⁰ For example: Chesterman’s Hieronymic Oath (2001), ethics in children’s literature (Oittinen 2014), activism and translation (Tymoczko 2006), crowdsourcing (Dolmaya 2011), ethics in translator and interpreter training (Baker & Maier 2011/2014).

(“De Tours” 165-166). Derrida’s bold and passionate text has been crucial in the quest to overcome the dialectic I/Other, as will be evident in the next two sections.

The Aesth-ethical Turn in Postcolonial Translation

The four outlined tendencies have substantially affected postcolonial translation, as I will discuss in this section. I use the verb “affect” both in the senses of reception and refusal, and because of the shift from the duality of mind/body to the interplay between intellectual and sensitive life within postcolonial studies. But before examining the contact/conflict zones between the four tendencies, TS, and postcolonial translation, a preliminary analysis of the word “postcolonial” is required.

Since the term first made its appearance in the humanities in the 1970s, many definitions have been proposed. As has been the case with other “posts” (postmodernism or poststructuralism, for example), the main concern with postcolonial studies has been about the prefix “post,” as indicating a period which comes after (in this case, after colonialism). Postcolonial studies were first regarded as a theoretical response to the end of colonialism in Africa and the proclamation of many African independent nations in the 1960s. However, as Stuart Hall posits in a famous essay (1995), the postcolonial field is a very contentious one—and one that presupposes the following question: “When was ‘the post-colonial’? What should be included and excluded from its frame?” (242).¹¹ In Hall’s perspective the “post” in postcolonial it is not limited to a given space or time (i.e., Anglophone or Francophone countries, in the 1960s), nor is it a homogeneous concept that is free of history, politics, and culture. It is rather a descriptive term referred to “a general process of decolonisation which, like colonisation itself, has marked the colonising societies as powerfully as it has the colonised (of course, in different ways),” and that help us to “characterise the shift in global relations which marks the (necessarily uneven) transition from the age of Empires to the post-independence or postdecolonisation moment”; and also “to identify what are the new relations and dispositions of power which are emerging in the new conjuncture” (253). Hence his invitation to “think at and beyond the limit” (261).

Colonialism and imperialism are certainly at the core of postcolonial studies. Western canonical literary texts and histories of Europe and the U.S. are re-interpreted in light of the fact that they were written and celebrated when “the West” was occupying, colonizing, and enslaving other territories, their stories, and their peoples.¹² Thus, postcolonial theory became a critical interdisciplinary tool applicable to everything from linguistics to anthropology, a trait which caused some critics to view it as nebulous, vague, and not politically anchored (See Shoat 1992, for example). Yet, as Leela Gandhi observes in her *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*

¹¹ Hall’s seminal essay is crucial to understand the postcolonial in the label postcolonial translation in that it does not anchor the latter to a “limit,” but nonetheless it reconsiders it through the lens of literary criticism and politics. In this sense, postcolonial translation can be viewed as a theoretical reconsideration of translation and power relations.

¹² For Hall himself, if a postcolonial periodization should exist, its real distinctive element would be the “retrospective re-phrasing of Modernity within the framework of ‘globalisation’ in all its various ruptural forms and moments (from the Portuguese entry to the Indian Ocean and the conquest of the New World to the internationalisation of financial markets and information flows)” (260).

(1998): “[T]he intellectual history of postcolonial theory is marked by a dialectics between Marxism, on the one hand, and poststructuralism/postmodernism, on the other” (7).

Indeed, there is in postcolonial theory both a political reference—i.e., Marxism and its critique of capitalism and, thereby, imperialism and colonialism—and a textual source—poststructuralist language, its dismissal of logical thinking based on binarism, linearity, hierarchy, and uniformity, and its engagement with the fragment, the hybrid, and the synchronic. It is according to the latter frame—the methodological one with its interdisciplinarity and synthesis of Marxism and poststructuralism—that I will use the term “postcolonial,” without disregarding the recent controversy surrounding the postcolonial ethical commitment (i.e., the risk of another grand narrative, intellectual extractivism, the leftist failure to address non-secular forms of knowledge, etc.).

Postcolonial translation has partly absorbed postcolonial methodology and partly incorporated the main themes and theories of TS. According to Tymoczko, postcolonial translation is itself a metaphor for translation:

[P]ost-colonial writing might be imaged as a form of translation (...) in which venerable and holy (historical, mythic and literary) relics are moved from one sanctified spot of worship to another more central and more secure (because more powerful) location, at which the cult is intended to be preserved, to take root and find new life. There is, of course, much in this metaphor that bears reflection (...) in relation to many works emanating from former colonies, and the metaphor is suggestive of certain perils faced by writers in these circumstances. (“Translation, Writing ...” 22)

We have a sort of double mirror or metaphor, given that the original/copy complexities in TS resemble the center/periphery complexities in postcolonial theory. If we examine postcolonial translation in juxtaposition with the aforementioned tendencies and postcolonial theories, we can then pinpoint four major problems that are still on the table: transparency, invisibility, commitment, and resistance. Since, as Bassnett and Trivedi point out (1999), “colonialism and translation went hand in hand” (*Post-colonial Translation* 3), the translation of literary texts written by former colonized people has never been considered as an innocent, transparent, or invisible activity. In consequence, in postcolonial translation, the cultural, ethical, and aesthetical turns have prevailed over other TS theories and studies (i.e., descriptivism, computer-based research, etc.). Therefore, the fourth tendency discussed in the previous session has been crucial to the postcolonial translation of literary texts, though with some different—even paradoxical—implications.

Transparency—the Greek / Enlightenment principle of clarity, intelligibility, absolute correspondence, and fidelity between original and translated text—has been both strongly criticized, and paradoxically celebrated in postcolonial theory and translation. During the colonial period, to translate a postcolonial text faithfully was a highly manipulative practice. As Sherry Simon and Paul St. Pierre contend (2000), most of the texts written in the colonies were adapted to the receiving (mainstream and dominant) culture (11-12). This continues today, as many postcolonial texts written in English, when translated into so-called ‘minor languages,’ undergo a process of re-adaptation. As a result, fidelity is what would be required in order to

avoid reduction of the source text. However, one of the major challenges of postcolonial literature is untranslatability both at the semantic, and syntactic levels, as many postcolonial writers use words of other native languages, or languages and idiomatic expressions originating during colonialism (i.e., creole, patois, pidgin, postcolonial English, francophone, Iberic, or Lusophony variants).

According to Emily Apter (2013), “non-translation, mistranslation, incomparability and untranslatability” (3) can be equally significant for the study of comparative literatures. The postcolonial translation studies of Simona Bertacco, Franca Cavagnoli, and Biancamaria Rizzardi all follow and implement this line of thought, for example. As Bertacco states (2014), untranslatability should be both recognized, and—at all costs—“not translated” (25). The agency inherent in postcolonial translations—translations of postcolonial texts are essentially translations of anticolonial texts and, therefore, politically resistant—can teach us an important lesson about translation:

[It] is the model, not only for postcolonial writing that develops within multiple cultural and linguistic contexts, but also for a critical praxis that is aware of, and sensitive to, the complexities of contemporary global language politics. (26)

The same paradoxical perspective applies to invisibility, which contrasts with the attempt by postcolonial literature to carve out an identity space. The translation of a postcolonial text should guarantee the visibility of cultures that have been rendered invisible by the over-visibility of the English language and the Western canon. Yet, nowadays there is a very debated tendency to translate more postcolonial literature than other genres, because of the increasing visibility that, especially black writers, have acquired in Europe and the U.S. (or has been demanded by white audiences). This has caused postcolonial scholars to reflect on new forms of neocolonialism, such as white extractivism, and postcolonial translation to interrogate whether there might be some form of domestication at work (e.g., the English used by postcolonial writers is closer to standard British/English than postcolonial “Englishes” or creoles), or, rather, the cause resides in the phenomena of globalization and transnational solidarity. What happened to *Zong!* can be explained in terms of both the need to sensitize the Italian audience to the issue of migration and deaths in the Mediterranean, and the editorial trend to translate black authors who address the racial problem.¹³ Still, there is the ethical risk of reducing the Middle Passage to the current Mediterranean context and vice-versa.¹⁴

In the face of the challenges and pitfalls posed by these new perspectives on transparency and invisibility, some postcolonial translation theorists have resorted to notions of resistance and commitment. To commit to a cause (racial liberation, social and gender emancipation) is one of the main goals of postcolonial translation. For Tymoczko, while translation itself is a

¹³ See, for example, the recent article on translating blackness in Italy by Barbara Somuah-Ofosu and Candice Whitney (2020).

¹⁴ There has been an ongoing debate in Italy about the recent translation of *Zong!* in the past year, which has generated three very polemic articles, two of which re-propose the necessity to approach *Zong!* through the Mediterranean crisis, justifying the Italian translation. Only one accuses the translated text to have violated two important ethical principles: fidelity and trust. See Walter Montefusco’s polemic article on Philip (2022).

“commissive act,” postcolonial translation is a practice of activism immersed in the language of engagement, one that presupposes,

involvement, participation, mutual pledges and promises, making guarantees, assuming obligations, exposing oneself to risk, entering into conflict, becoming interlocked or intermeshed, and action undertaken by more than one person. (*Translation, Resistance* 11)

Resistance, by contrast, while on the one hand an essential phase of postcolonial writing and translation—specifically, the second, in which the colonized opposes the colony/dominant culture that s/he has imitated/appropriated in the first phase, before reaching the final, third, phase and transcending the center/margin of the polarities—is also a reactive rather than proactive strategy (vii-viii, 11). In consequence, it can assume extreme and universalizing positions, as it depends on who is opposing what from where. Venuti’s foreignization as resistant strategy is an example of this, because while it is certainly effective in combating U.S. cultural dominance, in other parts of the world, it can have the opposite effect (viii).

In that respect, one of the most critical views on commitment and resistance in postcolonial translation and minority culture continues to be the one put forward by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in “The Politics of Translation”: “[W]hat seems resistant in the space of English may be reactionary in the space of the original language” (404). She urges translators to learn ‘minority languages,’ and acknowledge the presence of unbalanced relations of (class, gender, race) power within transnational resistance practices such as translation:

The task of the translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying, holds the agency of the translator and the demands of her imagined or actual audience at bay. The politics of translation from a non-European woman’s text too often suppresses this possibility because the translator cannot engage with, or cares insufficiently for, the rhetoricity of the original. (398)

Like textile texts, or textures, translations should thus include many histories in their weaving: “The history of the language, the history of the author’s moment, the history of the language-in and-as-translation (...)” (403). As the image of Babel reappears in the form of a much more intricate history, so translation returns as *afterlife*, to be further *augmented*, translated, and complicated by recent theories about blackness, and my proposal about a Babel blackness.

Babel Blackness: A Proposal for an Aesthetical Postcolonial Translation of Literary Texts¹⁵

The aesth-ethical turn has been highly relevant to recent debates over black aesthetics. In a recent philosophical inquiry on the philosophy of black aesthetics, Paul Taylor (2010) highlights that

¹⁵ Some parts of this sessions are the result of my current research into blackness. Édouard Glissant’s discussion on “consent not to be a single being” is a quote from an article I wrote for the Charles University journal *Litteraria Pragensia* (see References). It is ongoing research, which also informs my practice as translator of books (mainly essays) authored by black or diasporic people.

before analyzing what is “black” and what is “aesthetics,” one should be aware that the expression black aesthetics: a) though made popular in the 1960s through the *Black is Beautiful* campaign and Black Arts Movement, refers to a wider spatio-temporal frame dating back to the colonial enterprise and Middle Passage; b) cannot be reduced to a philosophical “interest in the norms that govern artistic production and evaluation” (1), but instead requires a broader metaphysical dimension, able to examine “the way that judgments of bodily beauty have shaped, and been shaped by, racialized practices of colonial domination” (1).

However, Taylor’s account does not take into consideration (i.e., notes, but does not discuss) recent debates over blackness by Moten and da Silva. Through their works, a new perception and understanding of blackness has been advanced, one no longer enmeshed in the conceptual language of ontology stemming from Enlightenment and perpetrated in post-Enlightenment philosophies through the illusive belief that the (white, self-determined, transparent) Subject has died. As da Silva comments in her fundamental study on the global idea of race (2007): “[T]he subject may be dead (...) but his ghost—the tools and the raw material used in his assemblage —remains with us” (xxiii). Blackness confronts the global idea of race and the supposed death of the subject by abolishing the foundational norms of subjectivity and race, as well as reflecting upon the entanglement between joy and pain within black culture and how this can help humanity see the world differently. As Moten observes in several of his works, blackness *is* a social force, it *is* beauty, joy, and accountability. It is *no*-thing, which means both not a thing and a thing not being a thing, but something else.¹⁶ It is a para-ontology,¹⁷ not attached uniquely (although preferentially) to black people:

[B]lackness must free itself from ontological expectation, must refuse subjection to ontology’s sanction against the very idea of black subjectivity. The paraontological distinction between blackness and blacks allows us no longer to be enthralled by the notion that blackness is a property that belongs to blacks (...) but also because ultimately it allows us to detach blackness from the question of being. (“Blackness and Nothingness” 749-50)

If blackness “must be understood in its ontological difference from black people who are, nevertheless, (under)privileged insofar as they are given (to) an understanding of it” (Harney and Moten 47); and if it is no longer inscribed in the grammar of onto-epistemology, then a postcolonial translation taking on the ethical force of blackness would tackle the very basis of the word translation in a movement that, akin or “appositional” to Derrida’s deconstructionism and Gilles Deleuze’s nomadism, at once blurs and instantiates difference.¹⁸ In particular, there are three *emanations* of blackness that can *augment* and complicate the approach to postcolonial

¹⁶ See Moten’s “Blackness and Nothingness” on this, that engages with both the thingliness and nothingness of blackness.

¹⁷ Moten uses the word “para-ontology” in reference to Nahum Chandler’s work on the para-ontologic (2007).

¹⁸ Apposition is a term widely used by Moten, drawn from both linguistics and biology. While in the former it is a construct with two noun phrases (np) next to each other in a clause, referring to the same person or thing, in the latter *appositionality* is the growth of successive layers of a cell wall. Derrida would call this addition an augmentation, a more life, a survival.

translations of literary texts (by black writers and not only): multiplicity, opacity, and inseparability. In certain aspects, they also complexify the four tendencies discussed earlier, as they cope with the main problems posed by Greek theory, Enlightenment, Romanticism, and all the post- movements (i.e., post-Enlightenment, postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism).

By embracing multiplicity, blackness argues for the ethical imperative of being self-determined in order to be a good individual. It also argues for the aesthetic principle of aesthetic beauty, which states that for a work of art to be beautiful, it must have a correspondence between the original and the copy, reducing otherness to sameness. The Greek ideal of equivalence is here discarded, broken, and disseminated. The echo and detours of Derrida's Babel are here crucial because it is in the guise of sound that their image (the tall tower of confusion) figures in blackness. According to Moten, multiplicity is rooted in the beautiful and poetic phrasing "consent not to be a single being" of Martinican poet and theorist Édouard Glissant.¹⁹ In traversing the Ocean *back* from England to the Caribbean, Glissant meditates about the unitary idea of slavery and its singular and dominant history, realizing that while Columbus *left*, he is the one who *returns*, to change that single history (of slavery and domination)—"the return occurs when slavery and domination disappear" ("Conversation with Diawara"). This erratic moment and change occur exactly "*when one consents not to be a single being and attempts to be many things at the same time*" ("Conversation with Diawara," emphasis mine).

Nonetheless, there is not a unique, originary, and original moment for multiplicity, because its "anoriginarity" (and anoriginality) as it happens in translation, allows more life for Glissant's consent.²⁰ Moten *augments* multiplicity into "*mu*—which has been variously translated from the Japanese translation of the Chinese *wu* as no, not, nought, nonbeing, emptiness, nothingness, nothing, no thing but which also bears the semantic trace of dance" ("Blackness and Nothingness" 750). *Mu*, which is also *music*. Multiplicity is therefore a *musical* amplification; it is a movement towards aurality: the vision of Babel fades into sound. Its confusion speaks in tongues whose grammar is not marked by clarity. Moten believes that pidgin English, for example, so important in some postcolonial texts of West African authors, bears the trace of *mu*—"its improvisatory refusal, rather than use, of 'a certain syntax,' so that the given is given over to its poetic alternative; its construction, rather than assumption, of a culture; its burial under the weight of civilization and the unlikely, paradoxically animative, exhaustion of such inter(n)ment" (759). What he proposes, though, is neither a re-valuation of postcolonial English, nor a simple reversal of power relations: blackness refuses to take the place of sovereignty; it is not a counter-ontology to whiteness. Rather, through the disruptive force of blackness, he translates language itself without demanding *the* knowledge—whether domesticated or foreignized—of the Other; but insisting on what cannot be known.

¹⁹ "*Consent à n'être plus un seul*": this is the original quote, uttered in French by Glissant in conversation with Malian scholar, filmmaker, and historian Manthia Diawara and translated by Christopher Winks in 2011.

²⁰ Anoriginarity derives from Moten's reading of Nahum Chandler's "anoriginary displacement" (2020). As Moten writes in *Stolen Life*, anoriginarity and anoriginality are inscribed in the grammar of law, but also in maternity: "Anoriginal expression bears a jurisgenerative grammar. It is before the law, as the law's *animaterial* foundation" (27).

Postcolonial translations that enfold multiplicity would allow the co-presence of translator and author, as well as all other authors and translators who have silently and invisibly contributed to the text. If the author is no longer in life, multiplicity would retrieve her/his/their spirit—the spirit that, as Afro-Caribbean thought teaches us, is part of our ancestry and as such, should be paid ethical care. *Zong!*, for example, is itself a story told Philip by his ancestors: a spiritual translation of an *unspeakable* story. Multiplicity, in addition, would envision translation as “black study,” which according to Harney and Moten is “what you do with other people. It’s talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice” (110). It is a rehearsal akin to a jam session. What if postcolonial translations are meant as improvisational plays in which, as in an ensemble, all the parts involved are equally important; in which they sound together only when they recognize the incompleteness of their individuality?

Multiplicity is also intertwined with opacity and inseparability (the two latter modes being inseparable themselves), which not only contrast with theories of transparency, visibility and separability but also seek to imagine a world in which what you cannot see and understand “figures out” another mode for knowing, one that ends the way we learned to know the world.²¹ As da Silva argues, the ethics of blackness do not aim for the “betterment of the World as we know it,” but for “its end” (“Toward a Black Feminist Poethics” 82). Once again, it is through, but also beyond, Glissant that opacity is introduced by Moten and *augmented* by da Silva. In *Poetics of Relation* (1997), the Martinican poet claims a “right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity” (190). Moten celebrates opacity not only as the right to not be understood (more than misunderstood), but as the right to “see through” the distortion and blurring offered by opacity (*Black and Blur*, 13); and, as he poetically *augments* later in *All That Beauty*, seeing through the “muddy waters” of black “wet” life means looking beyond oneself, toward the beauty of social life, toward the good company of what cannot be discerned transparently as one, single, and unique (8-9).

Here, again, Moten, through Glissant, does not seek to re-habilitate opacity to the level of light, to suggest the advent of a counter-enlightenment; he is rather questioning the aesthetic negative value given to what is “opaque,” not visible at first sight, concealed, dark. In this sense, his notion of opacity would also raise questions about the recently published volume *The Dark Side of Translation* (2020), in which Federico Italiano introduces two paradigms that do not reduce darkness to something merely “bad”—the Star Wars paradigm, in which darkness figures as something conflictual, almost un-ethical and un-aesthetical, and so is dismissed as one would dismiss war; and the paradigm suggested by the famous album “The Dark Side of the Moon” by the Pink Floyd, in which darkness figures as positive strategy and state of resistance. Although his discussion is still entrapped in both ontology and the dominance of sight over the other senses (2-4), he nevertheless places “darkness” at the core of TS and edits a book that recasts the complexity of the term “darkness,” offering insightful views about its political, ecological, cultural, and social consequences.

One example of this would be Daniel Graziadei’s highly suggestive and original proposal for opacity, “Darkness, Obscurity, Opacity. Ecology in Translation.” Not surprisingly, Graziadei mentions Glissant’s opacity through a contrapuntal reading with recent neurolinguistic theories

²¹ See Moten’s YouTube speech on the relevance of “figuring out” (2019).

of light and darkness. In particular, he analyzes how the primacy of sight over the other senses has generated fear of darkness (129-29) by highlighting the analogies between the threats posed to our brain when our eyes are deprived of light and those posed to translation when texts lack transparency. Opacity poses a problem to Steiner's dictum "translating is understanding" by rendering translation both a more accurate practice, and a strategy for accepting "the complexity of a world that can and will not be understood in every detail" (134).

Graziadei's conclusion is thus an opening up to the senses that are concealed both in our cognitive knowledge, and in transparent translation; it is also an anticipation of both multisensoriality, and what Harney and Moten call "exsense," (94)—i.e., an excess of sense, but also a plurality of senses outside and beyond the drive to understand "the" sense. However, paradoxically, he focuses on sight (even when obscured) more than the other senses. It is precisely in what Graziadei decides to not highlight/obscure that, in my opinion, da Silva's work on "difference without separability" (2016) becomes compelling for complicating opacity. Separability, the scientific principle that gathers "all that can be known about the things of the world" through "the forms (space and time) of the intuition and the categories of the Understanding (quantity, quality, relation, modality)" is an impediment to the recognition that in physical reality, the five senses and the four elements work simultaneously (60). Consider, for example, how hearing can operate at the same time as sight and touch. Hearing is the first sense to appear in unborn children and the last to disappear when adults die. (We can hear, here, the echo of *mu*, the aurality of blackness). In a conversation with Arjuna Neuman about their experimental film *Serpent Rain* (2016), da Silva reflects on the topic of sound and peri-acoustic attunement, a type of hearing resembling the one experienced by both pregnant mother and fetus in the womb, and she explains:

Sound is vibration. It propagates through everything. So I can hear with my hands. This more evident haptic aspect of sound is a reminder of how vision is haptic. Our eyes refract light (electromagnetic waves) emitted by things around us, which the brain translates into images. These waves are 'sensed' by the cornea and the retina, but they emit radiation that 'touches' us.²²

Serpent Rain disrupts vision through sound and through the haptic, translating images into hearing and touch. Among the images which intermittently interrupt its long shots is M.W. Turner's painting *The Slave Ship* (1840), inspired by the massacre on board the British slave ship *Zong!*.²³ Can we hear the sound of drowned bodies? Can we *figure out* in our retina the *touch* of their touching down? Can we respect both this hearing, and the unspeakable story to be translated? Can we translate the spacing between the ship and the sea without understanding it? Can we account for those lives who left but neither arrived, nor returned to their native land?

²² Margarida Mendes introduces "Serpent Rain" by Arjuna Neuman and Denise Ferreira da Silva at www.vdrome.org/neuman-da-silva

Conclusions

*In a sense, nothing is untranslatable;
but in another sense, everything is untranslatable;
translation is another name for the impossible.*

(Derrida, *The Monolingualism of the Other* 7)

There is no conclusion in translation. Its afterlife and continual linguistic deferral de-limits every attempt to come to terms with its own beauty and terror—as African-American poets would say. There are only echoes and vibrations of unasked questions that here I *must* ask—questions of both aesthetics and ethics.²⁴

What if postcolonial translations of literary works sensitively experiment with the multiplicity of blackness and abandon the pretense of sense (of the Other primarily)? What if the ex-sense—what is beyond, outside, but also in excess of sense—is what moves postcolonial translation?

What if we prefer engaging with the “muddy waters” where most of the postcolonial writing proliferated, where there is no transparency but opacity? What if we extend this *black and blur* vision to translation of non-postcolonial text? The *case* of blackness, after all, is accessible to everyone.²⁵ The Middle Passage affected global history. Race continues to be a global idea. Yet is it in the recognition of the different, unbalanced, and un-ethical way this affection took place that we must imagine another way to know the wor(l)d.

What if in our translation practice, we translate our “difference without separability”? Indeed, what would translation *inseparability* be? A (black feminist) po-ethics intended to end the world as we know it, as da Silva invites us to do? Or, rather, to know the world differently, or to know it as we knew, but were not allowed to know? What if translations end knowledge of the world (its politics, striving for excellence, individuation, maniacal will to comprehend and

²⁴ This sentence echoes Moten’s (2013b) “unasked question,” which is blackness’ quest(ion): “Can this sharing of a life in homelessness, this interplay of the refusal of what has been refused and consent, this undercommon appositionality, be a place from which to know, a place out of which emerges neither self-consciousness nor knowledge of the other but an improvisation that proceeds from somewhere on the other side of an unasked question?” (756).

²⁵ It is a reference to Moten’s essay “The Case of Blackness” (2008), in which Moten pays homage to *Black Skin White Masks*’ famous fifth chapter, translated in English as “the fact of blackness,” but whose literal translation should have been (in his view) “The lived experience of the black” (179). Moten introduces the word “case” to bridge the gap between black and blackness, which reproduces the Heideggerian distinction between beings and being. Ultimately, this bridge can explain blackness’ “accessibility” (as well as its access-ability) to life and its extension to all human beings. In *Undercommons* the conjuncture, or coalition, is further explained as follows: “The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it’s fucked up for you, in the same way that we’ve already recognized that it’s fucked up for us. I don’t need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?” (141).

possess everything)? What if they become a po-ethics of *plenum* that takes care of our lives, desires, sensibility, and sensitivity?

Returning to *Zong!* and its poetry (which is already a form of *augmentation*), we are undoubtedly returning to a text of silence and spaces, as Mallarmé would suggest, whose translation requires several readings of its ex-sense/excess. It requires study, “black study,” and a touch of love between all the parts involved, without the pretense of separability. It requires that both the translator and the reader go deep down into the Ocean’s “muddy waters,” re-membering what has been lost, but also conjuring the confusion of Babel—its detours, its inability to tell a single story, to translate in a single way. It requires Babel blackness: a translation mode for a story “not to be passed on” (Toni Morrison), or a story that “cannot be told yet must be told; it can only be told by not telling” (NourbeSe M. Philip).

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